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Under a special academic exchange program sponsored by Fidel Castro, 40 American medical school students are allowed to study medicine in Havana, Cuba.

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Citation

MLA
American Medical School Students Study in Cuba.

ANN CURRY, co-host:
For the first time, American medical students are studying to become doctors in Havana. It's part of a Cuban program to train doctors to work in poor communities in their own countries. Well, given Cuba's long-standing economic and political isolation from much of the world, some observers are wondering if Fidel Castro is being a good neighbor or just a smart politician. NBC's Andrea Mitchell took a closer look.

ANDREA MITCHELL reporting:
Twenty-three-year-old Karima Mosi, a US student from San Diego, now studying medicine in Havana, one of 40 Americans taking up Fidel Castro's offer of a full scholarship if they will then practice medicine in poor neighborhoods back home.

Ms. KARIMA MOSI: We are not concerned with politics. We are concerned with becoming doctors and going back to our countries and doing good in our countries.

MITCHELL: On the outskirts of Havana, a different weapon in Fidel Castro's foreign policy arsenal.

FIDEL CASTRO: (Spanish spoken)

MITCHELL: After decades of isolation from his neighbors...

Mr. CASTRO: (Spanish spoken)

MITCHELL: ...for the past three years, Castro has been trying to win the hearts and minds of a new generation of Latin Americans by training them as doctors, this year adding U.S. students as well.

Ms. MOSI: I had people that are telling me, `Don't go.' And then I had people telling me, `Go.' So I decided I was just going to go and figure out for myself what Cuba is.

MITCHELL: The Americans, able to study here despite the US embargo against Cuba. A special provision permits academic exchanges. Even the location is symbolic. The school, which Castro showed us, a year and a half ago used to train Cuban soldiers in naval defense. Now it offers a free medical education to nearly 5,000 would-be doctors from 24 different countries, including the United States.
Mr. CASTRO: (Spanish spoken)
MITCHELL: And Cuba pays for it all—tuition for the six-year program, room and board, text books, even white lab coats and spending money; all this while Castro's own hospitals suffer shortages of basics like penicillin and sutures.

Ms. MARCELLA URQUIA: (Spanish spoken)
MITCHELL: Marcela Urquia is typical of the 500 Honduran students studying medicine in Cuba.
Ms. URQUIA: In my country, there's a lot of really, really poor people, and they really need doctors, you know, doctors that want to help them.

MITCHELL: Honduras, still struggling to recover from Hurricane Mitch three years ago, one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere, in dire need of doctors and medical services. But some critics wonder, how can Cuba train these doctors when it needs help itself? Cuba has its own economic problems. How can you afford to support this kind of program, sending the doctors abroad?
Mr. CASTRO: (Through translator) Yes, we have other problems, but not medical problems. That's why we can do it. You know, we have made great progress in medicine.

MITCHELL: Life in Havana is hardly what Karima would be experiencing at an American medical school.

Ms. MOSI: The food, the no toilet seats, things like that, it doesn't really matter. I mean, I'm in like the best place I can be to study medicine, I think.

MITCHELL: Still, some question Castro's motives.

Mr. WILLIAM LEOGRANDE (American University): I think there is no doubt that a school like this is a Cuban foreign policy tool to enhance their general influence abroad and to show that they are being successful in their basic health programs and their educational programs as well.

MITCHELL: But looking at these future doctors, no one doubts that good medicine is also good politics.
For TODAY, Andrea Mitchell, NBC News.